

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Young people are stronger than you think. And they deserve better.”

*YYA Interviewee*

Youth and Young Adults (YYA) experience homelessness in every community across Cape Cod, Martha’s Vineyard, and Nantucket (“the Cape and Islands”).<sup>1</sup> On any given night at least 30 YYA live on the street, in shelters, and places not meant for human habitation according to conservative estimates (HUD, 2018). More than two thousand may experience some kind of homelessness over the course of a year (Morton, 2017; Census, 2017). They find themselves without a stable place to live because home isn’t safe, isn’t supportive, or doesn’t exist.

### Assessing Our Need

Between February and June 2019 the Barnstable County Department of Human Services, with Matthew Aronson Consulting, used quantitative and qualitative methods to assess the system and individual needs of YYA experiencing homelessness in the five sub-regions.<sup>1</sup> Community members, service partners, and YYA provided input via interviews, focus groups, and surveys that were focused on homelessness prevention and on intervention for those currently experiencing homelessness. We investigated the experiences of YYA under 18, and between 18 and 24 (both parenting and unaccompanied) and considered the issues of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity to understand YYA needs related to stable housing, education, employment, health and wellbeing, and permanent connections.

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<sup>1</sup> “**Cape and Islands**” refers to the Massachusetts counties of Barnstable, Dukes, and Nantucket. There are **5 sub-regions**: Barnstable County has 3 sub-regions (**Upper Cape, Mid-Cape, and Outer Cape**), Dukes County is commonly referred to as **Martha’s Vineyard**, and Nantucket County is referred to as **Nantucket**.

## Key Findings

**1. As many as 2,400 YYA may experience some form of homelessness over the course of a year, but the number with high needs may be much smaller (Morton, 2017; Census, 2017).**

The Cape and Islands' annual Point-in-Time (PIT) count identified 27 YYA in 2018 (HUD, 2018). For the year 2018 HMIS service-based count (cumulative) included 100 YYA sleeping in unstable living situations, institutions, emergency shelter, the street, other places not meant for human habitation, and permanent housing (HMIS, 2018). A further 133 accessed services only during 2018. Using national rules of thumb to estimate rates of YYA homelessness suggests that as many as 2,400 YYA may experience some form of homelessness annually in the region.

**2. Homelessness affects vulnerable and minority populations disproportionately.**

On the Cape and Islands Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ YYA experience homelessness at disproportionate rates compared to their representation in the general population (HUD, 2018; Mass.gov, 2018; HMIS, 2018; Census, 2017). Awareness of these disparities among the Cape and Islands' provider community and general population appears low.

**3. The lack of year-round affordable housing puts pressure on housing stability for YYA.**

Average housing costs on the Cape and Islands exceed 37% of median income and fair market rents are more than twice what a person making an average wage can afford (NLIHC, 2019). Large seasonal rent hikes and month-to-month lease arrangements lead to a housing "shuffle" that often requires families to move multiple times per year and leaves many independent YYA without a stable and safe place to live. Constant movement also makes it challenging to collect data, identify YYA at risk, establish eligibility for programs, and deliver services.

**4. There are several service-related gaps that may leave YYA with unmet needs.**

This assessment identifies important gaps in services accessible to YYA experiencing homelessness. Service gaps include the following:

- a. Lack of timely and effective risk assessment for YYA homelessness.
- b. Cliff Effect upon exiting “The System” (High School, DYS, or DCF).
- c. Lack of timely access to mental health services for YYA.
- d. Lack of YYA-focused substance use treatment and recovery services.
- e. A deficit in training and understanding among adults serving YYA experiencing homelessness.

***5. Small social networks, stigma, and a lack of awareness suppress identification, prevention, and intervention.***

Teachers, neighbors, social service professionals, and even family members struggle to identify or appropriately engage YYA who may need support. Small tight-knit communities enable powerful kin-like support mechanisms but can also be powerful isolating forces associated with stigma and shame. While the former should make identification and prevention easier than for larger communities, the latter reduces the overall likelihood that a YYA will self-identify as experiencing housing instability and that the community will create safe and supportive spaces to discuss housing instability. Common misconceptions and biases can dissuade community members from engaging in productive solutions and may lead to detrimental policies. The community does not have a systematic approach to prevention and identification that might otherwise offset these deficiencies.

***6. YYA voices are largely absent from decision making.***

There is currently no framework for YYA with lived experience of homelessness to participate in shaping the homelessness prevention and response system. Their expertise in the way the system works is missing from policy discussions. This slows the identification of effective solutions, limits solution buy-in from YYA stakeholders, and may prevent policy change that might help traditional providers value and integrate YYA agency into their programs. While there are instances of YYA partnership at the program and organization level, there is little capacity, experience, training, support, or coordination to sustain meaningful system-level YYA engagement.

***7. Regional differences and similarities matter.***

Each of the five sub-regions of the Cape and Islands has its own identity, governance structure, resources, and challenges that impact the cause and experience of homelessness for YYA. The Islands contend with additional challenges related to “on-Island” vs. “off-Island” culture, immigration, and transportation. But all parts of the Cape and Islands share similarities related to disruptive seasonal housing and employment shifts, transportation challenges, significant overrepresentation of Black and Latinx YYA among those experiencing homelessness, and tension with “off-Cape” and “off-Island” organizations and state-run agencies.

**8. *The Cape and Islands do not have a system designed to prevent and end YYA homelessness.*** There are no organizations solely dedicated to YYA homelessness, no beds dedicated to homeless YYA, nor is there an entity responsible for the coordination of YYA services. The lack of dedicated resources and coordination leads to gaps in service delivery, limits data analysis and system planning, and prevents the adoption of best and promising new practices.

## Next Steps

This report recommends two next steps to further the work of preventing and ending YYA homelessness on the Cape and Islands:

**1. *Create a YYA Workgroup within the Cape and Islands Regional Network on Homelessness.***

The Cape and Islands Regional Network on Homelessness, a deliberative body created to address homelessness, could create a new workgroup to address the community’s response to end YYA homelessness. With YYA participation, the workgroup could develop recommendations and an implementation plan. It should also consider establishing a regional structure to coordinate YYA resources, organizations, and service providers across the Cape and Islands.

Issues for prioritized consideration should include the following:

- a. Explore opportunities for YYA-specific housing options.

- b. Establish consistent data capture and storage procedures among all YYA homelessness service providers (e.g. use of HMIS).<sup>2</sup>
- c. Estimate unmet need for YYA homelessness services, including further analysis of sub-populations of YYA not addressed in this report (e.g. Wampanoag YYA, YYA experiencing commercial and sexual exploitation, and YYA leaving the DCF and DYS systems).
- d. Include non-traditional service providers and community supports to address YYA homelessness (e.g. faith-based groups, town libraries, school districts, Cape Cod Community College).
- e. Educate the Cape and Islands community on the factors contributing to YYA homelessness and the services that these persons need.

***2. Include YYA at risk of, and experiencing, homelessness in all assessment, planning, and implementation processes.***

YYA experience the homelessness system differently than do adults. Without YYA engagement in community planning, community leaders may not make the best decisions, implement the most effective programs with the right rules and procedures, or garner the buy-in and support from the young people that they serve. YYA with experience of homelessness need to be included in the process regularly and as early as possible.

“So many people are concerned about housing here. Most of us are overwhelmed and think that there's nothing you can do about it. We need a victory. We need to show that this is addressable. If we could have even one small victory around housing, affordable housing, I think that would snowball.” *Focus group participant*

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<sup>2</sup> HMIS: **Homeless Management Information System:** A computerized data collection tool designed to capture client-level information over time on the characteristics and service needs of men, women, and children experiencing homelessness.